



# TANKS AND “SHOCK AND AWE”

by Captain Jay D. Pellerin

When I first heard the term “shock and awe” that was used to describe the initial bombing of Baghdad aimed at destroying Saddam Hussein’s regime during the first days of Operation Iraqi Freedom, I admit to initially being slightly incensed. The first thing that came to mind as I watched the explosions on the television news was, “here we go again.” I remember thinking about Kosovo and NATO’s “air war.” It had peeved me then to think that the news agencies and, subsequently, the public would be overemphasizing airpower.

Of course, we know the outcome of that operation, and all of it without a single ground unit. I believed Iraq was different. Instead of coercing a government to come to an agreement, Iraqi Freedom meant regime change and possibly urban warfare. I recall hearing, “the size of California” more than once, in regards to controlling the territory of Iraq.

The term “shock and awe” took my memory back to a welcome packet I received from my former National Guard unit. Inside the packet was a piece of paper with a drawing of a tank, and under the tank were three words — “shock, overwhelm, and destroy.” Tanks are fine examples of applying shock and awe, I

decided. After searching through a bookstore and online, I quite by accident ran across a link to what I first believed was an article, but is in fact a book titled, *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*.<sup>1</sup> The book was published in December 1996, nearly 7 years before Iraqi Freedom, which intrigued me.

What is this book about? The authors wanted to “explore alternative concepts for structuring mission capability packages around which future U.S. military forces might be configured.” What does this have to do with anything that might be considered shock and awe? It has to do with the latter part of the title — achieving rapid dominance.

Rapid dominance is really a theory about a new way to use the military. Instead of the slow buildup of heavy forces, which the authors term the “decisive force,” such as occurred in Operations Desert Shield/Storm, the U.S. military could use a regime of shock and awe to basically intimidate the enemy into submission.

This idea is not new, but the various types of shock and awe and how today’s military forces might apply them is quite intriguing. It appears that based partly on various news coverage of this concept and the odd (and largely inaccurate) antiwar online hysterics about this new policy, and to paraphrase, “that promotes nuking

countries to get our way,” that the ideas in this book do form some basis for current operations in Iraq and possibly national defense as a whole.

This article discusses the idea of shock and awe and how the main battle tank remains relevant — first, as a part of the rapid dominance concept, and secondly, the forms of shock and awe that it best fits. This, coupled with current events, will show that rapid dominance by shock and awe can work, and that tanks contribute to its success.

## Rapid Dominance

In its base form, rapid dominance is merely a reaction to tough times. With the end of the Cold War (yes, it apparently still haunts the military), there is no consensus on how we should fight. Related to that is the ever-shrinking defense budget. However, with information and other technologies being developed by the free enterprise system, perhaps there will be a positive run over, or available technologies with military application that the Department of Defense can buy off the shelf at a reasonable price.

Tied in with all of this is the fact (based again on 1996 events) that the U.S. military remains deployed worldwide, with no foreseeable decrease in its operating tempo. The decisive force concept is too

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slow and too expensive. What the rapid dominance concept seeks to do is to promote a revolutionary change in the way wars are fought, in addition to doing it quickly and cheaply. Rapid dominance is the long-sought strategic goal of affecting the will, understanding, and perception of an adversary. In short, destroy his will to resist before, during, and after the battle.

Rapid dominance has the ability to achieve this goal by using the necessary levels of shock and awe. Important to achieving shock and awe is integrating strategy, technology, and innovation. It is important to note that rapid dominance requires both physical and psychological effects. The rapid dominance force must also contain knowledge, rapidity, control of the environment, and brilliance.

So where does the main battle tank fit in? The traditional military aims to destroy, defeat, or neutralize the enemy's military capability, and this remains a fundamental concept. The tank is already well suited for this role, in addition to providing a real physical threat that can be seen and heard. In this way, the tank fulfills both the physical and the psychological effects needed to affect the enemy's will to fight. By violently applying the tank's capabilities, further psycho-



David Leeson, DMN Photo Staff

logical effects can be garnered. In other words, knowing a tank is coming can be scary. Seeing tanks destroy a fellow mechanized infantry company is paralyzing. This gives tanks the ability to dominate the enemy's will. Tanks can also be rapid during all phases of an operation. Although the tank is noted as being difficult to move and maintain, various places around the world maintain tanks and other equipment ready for combat. Just fly in crews and this heavy weapons system can be on the attack in a matter of hours. It is also tactically fast and well suited for maneuver warfare, although some have criticized its logistics tail. Along with the intended paralysis caused by psychological dominance, the tank's ability to physically occupy terrain aids in rapid dominance's need to control the battlefield environment at all levels.

When compared to the decisive force model, it is easily seen how the tank traditionally operated in that environment. Massive amounts of force were used, with psychological and other effects providing an ancillary role. The primary destructive means were based on force-on-force and attrition, with a margin for error. The problems with this model is the time required to assemble overwhelming force, and an enemy that may not actively use its technological or traditional military as the United States does. It focuses primarily on destroying military targets, especially armored vehicles. On a tactical level tank, operations remain the same. The point is that the tank, in supporting the objective of controlling the adversary's will to fight, also fulfills some of the technological requirements of a rapid dominance model. The force size where tanks have to fight a numerically superior enemy has been a part of U.S. military strategy since the days of the Cold War. Because the tank has been designed for this role, in conjunction with other forces, it is able to also maintain lower casualties that rapid dominance also requires, since the model lacks the standard buffer of larger number of forces in theater.



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While seeking knowledge of the environment and the enemy, tank forces and other armored vehicles have been used effectively in the reconnaissance role. Even with the logistics tail, the tank can be maintained and operated for long periods of time, which provides rapidity. In controlling the environment further, the tank has often been used in a counterreconnaissance role, and by its very presence, can often deceive the enemy as to what kind of force it is immediately facing.

In institutionalizing brilliance, the armor community is well equipped to learn and execute new tactics, techniques, and procedures to make the tank more capable. As for empowering individual elements, the combined arms in which tanks fight and train under, provide a flexible platform that can tailor tanks to fit the operation at any specific place and time.

As discussed, rapid dominance depends on the application of appropriate levels of shock and awe. Shock and awe are the means by which to intimidate and compel the enemy into accepting our strategic and political goals. Although, there are roughly nine forms of shock and awe, this article addresses only those forms best

fitted for the tank. These forms are largely historical in description and often take their names from particular events. There are roughly five forms in which I see tanks performing: overwhelming force, Blitzkrieg, Haitian, Roman Legions, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

#### **Overwhelming Force**

To a large extent, we are all familiar with overwhelming force and the decisive force concept as discussed earlier. How it fits within rapid dominance largely has to do with applying the force across a broader spectrum of leverage points to impose shock and awe. Here, the tank continues in its traditional role, but does not have to completely destroy the enemy to be victorious. Instead of continuing to fight, the enemy is sufficiently cowed into surrendering, fleeing, or in other words, defeated.

#### **Blitzkrieg**

The Blitzkrieg form probably provides the best way to use tanks. In Blitzkrieg, an enemy's line is penetrated and mass is achieved in a narrow salient. An enemy that is dependent on maintaining his lines to protect his otherwise vulnerable sup-

port assets and command and control nodes, basically panics when faced with large numbers of tanks when he has little or ineffective antitank capability. On a tactical level, this is synonymous with conducting a breach and providing a point of penetration in which the majority of forces attack through and not just to the rear of the immediate defensive line. Just to reiterate, you can see how the tank's real and physical destructive power allows it to achieve a psychological effect.

#### **Haitian**

The Haitian form is based on a show of force against the French during the 1800s in Haiti. In today's terms, it would involve parading the same tanks over and over again to provide the illusion of a larger force. This form of deception also works for making nonmission capable tanks seem mission capable, whether due to maintenance or the lack of training. It is important to note that many communist countries have done this, and some, such as North Korea, still do (that is if you believe their equipment is nonmission capable or their tankers are not trained). A better example of an operational setting was in 1991: if Iraq's military caused the U.S. and its allies not to attack because on paper its army was the 4th largest in the world, then shock and awe would have been achieved by the Iraqis through psychological means.

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### The Roman Legions

The Roman Legions form might also be called “ultimate retribution.” Romans made little distinction between the enemy’s military and society; however, the idea of tanks rolling over civilians is too repugnant. Furthermore, the Romans were perceived as being invincible. If America’s military power is perceived as invincible, then the loss of a few tanks will not enter the equation, as it is certain even the Romans had casualties. The public sees tanks as being invincible, and despite the bravado shown by certain Iraqi officials near destroyed American tanks, they would not be anywhere near one otherwise.

The big difference between this form of shock and awe and the others is that the enemy or nation in question knows that it will lose, and even if the operation is limited, its military will be destroyed. Whether for personal security or to ensure its neighbors do not take advantage of its sudden weakness, heads of regimes cannot afford to lose their militaries. The United States has many sea and air assets to use to conduct reprisals. The closest tank may come from the U.S. Marine Corps, but U.S. Army tanks are a sign of American resolve and commitment, which we failed to achieve in Somalia. To the point, tanks on the ground mean those who challenge the might of the United States face that might at their own peril.

### The Royal Canadian Mounted Police

The last form refers to the unofficial motto of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, “never send a man where you can send a bullet.” This refers obviously to standoff capability and more so, because this will do it. More attune to airpower, tanks nonetheless may find themselves in places where they have standoff and can effectively destroy the enemy with impunity. However, this form is extremely limited for tanks when standoff is being considered beyond the tactical level.

From what we have seen in Iraq, the United States defeated a country the size of California within a matter of weeks. This fact is not important — the way in which it was done is important. Much to the alarm of some former general officers, the war kicked off with one Marine Expeditionary Force and one Infantry Division (Mechanized), apparently using the Blitzkrieg form of shock and awe, while airpower used another form of shock and awe to decapitate Saddam Hussein’s regime. Some thought there needed to be more troops on the ground or that we absolutely had to have that northern front coming out of Turkey. Recent events have proven that the U.S. military can achieve rapid dominance by using heavy units — 3d Infantry Division tanks rapidly attacked north.

Despite sand storms and a long logistics tail, U.S. forces remained flexible

and ultimately victorious with low casualties and an enemy that could not and would not fight.

In light of U.S.-Syrian relations, we must determine if “ultimate retribution” will be the next step, and if this rapid dominance achievement was purely luck and/or an incredibly incompetent foe. In any case, deficiencies normally cited regarding tanks in a decisive force role do not impact sufficiently in their role as part of rapid dominance — in fact, they contribute to the success of new military policy.



### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade, *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*, National Defense University Press Book, December 1996.

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